

## Somerville's first high-tech startup

By **Erin Dower**/ Journal Staff

Thursday, June 30, 2005

An engineer from Framingham has shed some light on the "high tech" history of electricity in Somerville.

Gil Cooke, a retired electrical engineer, said he has made a hobby of researching the Somerville Electric Light Company, the bright idea of a group of local men in 1886.

People today may think of electrical wiring and poles that line city streets as "God awful looking stuff," Cooke said.

"It's dull and it's not necessarily pretty," he said. "But that was not the case in 1887."

Cooke wrote a paper entitled "Somerville Electric Light Company: 1886-1903, The design and evolution of a successful enterprise," which recently appeared in the Society for Industrial Archeology newsletter.

Cooke said Somerville was only shortly behind Boston and other large cities in developing an electrical infrastructure.

Somerville Electric Light Company, or SELCO, was chartered in Massachusetts in February 1887, Cooke said. The company first operated out of an old gristmill south of Union Square at Webster and Concord avenues, but opened a new central station in 1889 that still stands today at 110 Willow Ave. near the corner of Whipple Avenue and the bike path.

Most of SELCO's charter members were affiliated with Tufts College (now Tufts University), Cooke said. They included Elmer H. Capon, who was the first president of Tufts; Frank S. Pearson, the company general manager; A.E. Dolbear, a Tufts professor; Henry C. Buck, a Tufts graduate; and Frank Ellwood Smith, a Tufts graduate who came on board as a bookkeeper in 1889.

Cooke said SELCO was like a "high technology startup" that provided a new service that was probably more important at its outset than the function of the World Wide Web today. The electric company grossed \$45,300 in earnings in 1892 and \$124,700 by 1902; it was sold the following year to the Edison Light Company, he said.

Cooke said SELCO started with 54 arc lamps in 1888 and had installed nearly 600 by 1903. The company introduced 162 incandescent lamps in 1889 and had 222 of the lamps in place within five years, he said. City Hall, Tufts College and a printing company were among the first incandescent lighting customers, he said. SELCO also served Arlington and Belmont, he said.

Somerville signed a contract with SELCO in June 1887 for 50 arc lights for one year at a rate of 37 cents per night until 1 a.m. While most city's used round electric poles,

Somerville initially used square poles of hard pine and the city phased out the use of hundreds of oil and gas lamps between 1889 and 1901, Cooke said.

Steve Mackey, a local history buff and president of the city's Chamber of Commerce, said Cooke's research topic is "very interesting" and agrees with Cooke that "electrification was then what the Internet is now."

Mackey said the city's population grew from 40,000 in 1890 to 77,000 in 1910, and the boom "most definitely" had to do with the city's installation of electricity and other convenient utilities.

"The past is all a blur, but any time you get ... someone doing research, like Gil Cooke, who gets the finer details, it always turns out to be a great story," Mackey said.

Cooke said he is continuing to research the history of SELCO and is writing a biography on Pearson, the SELCO manager who died aboard the Lusitania when it sank in 1915.

He said anyone with more information on Pearson or other SELCO founders or employees should contact him by e-mail at [gilcooke@ieee.org](mailto:gilcooke@ieee.org) or call Kristi Chase in the city's Historic Preservation Office at 617-625-6600, extension 2500.